

Writers and Their Work: No. 7

E. M.
FORSTER
by
REX WARNER

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*Bibliographical Series
of Supplements to 'British Book News'
on Writers and Their Work*

GENERAL EDITOR
T. O. Beachcroft

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CHECKED 2003

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SOMETIMES one hears it said that E. M. Forster is, in literature, the last survivor of a cultured liberal tradition which is now being swept away by war, by economics and by the internecine struggle of dogmatically opposed ideas. Such a tradition is imagined as gentle, tolerant, and intelligent. It is the tradition of classical literature, enthusiasm for the arts, anti-imperialism, deep respect for the sincerities of personal relationships. I shall hope to suggest that, though E. M. Forster is in this tradition, he is also capable of standing outside it, that he is creative beyond the boundaries of a mild tolerance, more deeply moved and more deeply moving than one who carries for a short period an inherited torch. Though he has influenced others, he shows in his own work no obvious derivations. It is a work which, in spite of the wit and subtlety of its style and manner, is both prophetic and intense. It is filled with a passion for truth in personal emotions and relationships, a hatred of what is false or stupid. It accepts the size and grandeur of the world, then, with a vigorous modesty, comes to grips with it. So a world of art is created and, in its turn, shapes and alters what exists.

CHECKED 2003

It is sufficient evidence for the originality and pointedness of E. M. Forster's work to look back at the novels published before the 1914 war. The world described is different from the world of to-day: the problems and conflicts are the same, and, at least in *Howards End*, the elements of passion and of melodrama are not missing. It is as true to say that Forster is in revolt from his tradition as that he is a part of it. His theme is the English middle class in which he was brought up. In all his novels he opposes to the ways and manners of this class something radically different—Italy, illegitimacy, squalid poverty, India. Thus the clearly understood and analysed ethos of the class is always seen both from the inside and the outside. Moreover, within the class itself there are differences and tensions connected with and yet different from the main opposition which on

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symbolize for him the poles of oppressive regimentation and that kind of knowledge which is perfect freedom. Certainly in his case, as in the case of all people, the experiences of childhood and youth were of the greatest importance.

E. M. Forster was born on 1 January 1879. His tradition was that of English middle-class culture—respect for the intellect, for personal relationships, for reform. Of this class he writes himself:¹

They gained wealth by the Industrial Revolution, political power by the Reform Bill of 1832; they are connected with the rise and organization of the British Empire; they are responsible for the literature of the nineteenth century. Solidity, caution, integrity, efficiency. Lack of imagination, hypocrisy.

It is these last two qualities which are chiefly satirized in Forster's work. They are responsible for that 'undeveloped heart' which, according to Mr. Trilling, is 'the great central theme' of Forster's thought. Forster's own words on this subject come from the essay just quoted. Writing of those who leave their public schools in England ('This extraordinary institution', he comments, 'is local') he says that they go out into the world 'with well-developed bodies, fairly developed minds and undeveloped hearts. And it is this undeveloped heart that is largely responsible for the difficulties of Englishmen abroad. An undeveloped heart—not a cold one.'

It is characteristic that this passage should be written with reference to the public schools. Forster himself was a day-boy at Tonbridge, which appears to be the 'Sawston' of his first two novels. Of the system he has little, if any, good to say. It is this system which comes near to ruining the hero of *The Longest Journey*.

In Cambridge, on the other hand (where he studied classics and history), Forster seems to have found the exact antithesis to the public schools. In Cambridge individuals

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that are to appear in his later work. There are the two contrasting ways of life—in this case represented by Sawston and Italy; there is the wit and comedy which veil fierce passions and end in acts which are almost melodramatic; there is the search for salvation. There is the characteristic balance and integrity of thought. Though Sawston and all it stands for is condemned, Italy is not sentimentally exalted. There is keen and brilliant criticism of the various snobberies, social and intellectual; there is the insistence both on truth and on the difficulty of discovering it. There are also, I think, some faults which recur in the other novels. *Where Angels Fear to Tread* is, according to Mr. Trilling, 'a novel of sexuality'. I should say that this judgement rather over-simplifies the matter, but it is true that sexuality plays a large part in the story. It is therefore a pity that Forster seems curiously ill at ease with this aspect of reality. Brilliant as he is in his treatment of women on all occasions except when they are in love, he seems to deal with their love scenes as if they were unavoidable plagues. Nor is he much more successful with the men, all of whom, when in love, become suddenly incredible. Nor, I think, does Forster mean this to happen. He might well suggest that love between the sexes is a transitory experience of which much is hoped and from which little comes. But it is not quite this that he does suggest. One is tempted to feel that what he thinks is that this is one of the things that he ought to like, but doesn't. And his women are usually made to answer for it. When they are cosy, they are often good. When they are elderly, they are sometimes given a sort of supernatural importance for which it is difficult to see the justification. When they are young they are usually exceptionally foolish, irresolute or wicked. As such they are admirably presented; indeed the foolish virgins are presented with sympathy as well as understanding—always, except when they are in love. There are similar defects in the male lovers, and again one cannot believe that these defects are intentional.

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Yet this unpromising character is, in a way, the hero of the book. One of its chief themes is the development of this undeveloped heart by contact with a different kind of Italy where human love is more emphatic than beauty and where there is a difference between statues and beggars. His experience is shared and partly shaped by another character who is, though in a different way, between the two worlds. This is Miss Caroline Abbott, a young and respectable Sawston girl. She again is transformed by Italy, and again this transformation takes place in two stages.

The Italian world is represented chiefly by the character of Gino, the son of a dentist in a small Italian town. He is good-looking, good-natured, normal in his appetites, totally conventional, but conventional in a Latin rather than in an English middle-class manner.

The two worlds are brought into contact by the visit to Italy of Lilia, Mrs. Herriton's daughter-in-law, whose husband has died. Lilia is a silly, though rather pathetic woman. Of her it is said that her 'one qualification for life was rather blowsy high spirits, which turned boisterous or querulous according to circumstances'. She has been thoroughly persecuted by her mother-in-law (all with the best intentions), and she is happy to be having a holiday in Italy, chaperoned by Miss Abbott.

In Italy she falls in love with Gino and marries him. The Herritons only hear of an engagement and Philip is sent to investigate. Naturally he regards the match as unsuitable. In fact he cannot imagine that dentists can exist in a country which to him is a kind of fairyland, a compost of ancient Rome, the middle ages and the Renaissance. He offers

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that Gino is by no means the monster that they have imagined. They visit an indifferent but very jolly performance at the local opera. Philip is welcomed as a long-lost brother by Gino and his friends. The baby is admired. Both Philip and Miss Abbott have rediscovered Italy—not in an aesthetic but in a human way. Only Harriet, pertinaciously refusing to enjoy or understand anything, remains totally true to the worst principles of the Sawston world.

The scene appears to be set for a comic ending; but the ending is far different. Harriet, with no conception that Gino can love his child, and acting from her religious convictions, steals the baby on her way to the station. Then, in an accident, the baby is killed. Philip, with his arm broken in the accident, goes to Gino with the news, and Gino, in an explosion of rage, gropes after Philip in a dark room, tortures him by twisting his broken arm and begins methodically to strangle him. At the last moment Miss Abbott arrives. She appears like a goddess and, almost miraculously, both saves Philip's life and makes the two men again into close friends.

A final surprise comes at the end of the book. The whole Italian experience has brought Philip and Miss Abbott close together. Philip, during their return to England, is on the point of proposing to her, when she informs him that all the time she has been, without ever disclosing the fact to anyone, physically in love with Gino. Her love has not been returned, because he regarded her not as a woman, but as a goddess. Now she will return to Sawston, happy if she can at times talk to Philip of him. Gino meanwhile has married again, finding it rather expensive not to do so.

This first novel of Forster's is not his best. It does seem, however, very characteristic of his art, and for this reason it has been described at such length. No description, of course, can do justice to the intricacies of the plot, the gradual changes in the characters, the wit and charm and satire of so many scenes. But a rough-and-ready description of the story may help to make clear certain aspects of Forster's

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more abundantly. The difference is that while Lawrence, in a religious fervour, plunges forward and invites us to follow him over great expanses, Forster, in whom there is no absence of feeling, seems in this respect to lead us up a long garden path, revealing at the end, perhaps, some ecstatic scene between the wrong people in the wrong place. Then, after insisting that this scene should be greatly admired, he takes us away. 'It is magnificent,' he seems to say, 'but on the whole one had better not.' Then, with a final turn of the knife, he adds: 'All the same, it would be magnificent if one could.'

Gino, for instance, seems to have as his reason for existing in the novel simply good looks and sex appeal. Yet he is not a D. H. Lawrence hero at all. His relations with women are ordinary, his mind is wholly conventional. He is most physically alive in the scene where he devilishly tortures Philip. This sudden outburst into violent sadism together with the melodramatic theft and death of the baby, also the transfiguration of Miss Abbott, have been held by some critics to be wholly out of keeping with the delicate and sure wit and satire that mark the first part of the book. I do not agree with this criticism. In Forster's art melodrama has a great importance. His work has an integument of extreme delicacy, yet the skin is stretched tight by something explosive beneath. It would be faulty and unnatural if the explosion never took place. Also the timing of the explosions is perfect.

What can be criticised, however (and here we must drop the metaphor of explosions) is something else. The theft and death of the baby seem to me perfectly appropriate. The sudden and fiendish cruelty of Gino, the transfiguration of Miss Abbott are not perfect. In the case of Gino, violence may be required, but it is not quite that kind of obscene violence for which nothing has prepared us hitherto. In the case of Miss Abbott, the frustration of her desires, while it may lend dignity to her character, hardly seems in itself sufficient evidence for her unnatural exaltation. In

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It will be seen that the novel again concerns a failed intellectual. Rickie cannot be called an attractive character, but he is a character viewed with great sympathy. It is women who cause his collapse by distorting his emotions. He puts into them what does not exist. Yet his unavailing efforts to discover what does exist do give him a certain dignity.

So far as the writing is concerned, Forster's satire on the public school world of Sawston is brilliant; his description of the deterioration of Rickie's character in this world is most moving. So too is his attack on Agnes. Yet still one notices an insecurity with regard to the deeper and more personal emotions. There are embarrassing moments in the account of the brief love affair between Agnes and Gerald Dawes, who is a handsome cad and bully, yet who, being in some unexplained way 'physical', is, after being, in Forster's words, 'broken up in the football match', unnaturally deified. Stephen also, as a representative of 'the

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She gave up trying to understand herself, and joined the vast armies of the benighted, who follow neither the heart nor the brain, and march to their destiny by catchwords. The armies are pleasant and pious folk. But they have yielded to the only enemy that matters—the enemy within. They have sinned against passion and truth, and vain will be their strife after virtue.

‘The heart and the brain’, ‘passion and truth’, ‘Eros and Pallas Athene’—these certainly appear to be Forster's ideals. But it is not so simple as that. In the end Lucy recognizes her real feelings and will marry George. At this point Mr. Beebe, a clergyman who so far has been definitely on the side of life, who has shown himself tolerant and understanding, who likes Italians and who will bathe naked, suddenly turns against the marriage.

This sudden *volte-face* has puzzled most critics. Some have explained it by suggesting that Forster dislikes clergymen so much that he could not bear to have one ‘good’ clergyman in any of his books. One has too high an opinion of the author's artistic integrity to accept this solution. Of Mr. Beebe we read : ‘His belief in celibacy, so carefully concealed beneath his tolerance and culture, now came to the surface and expanded like some delicate flower.’ His strong feeling in favour of virginity is ‘very subtle and quite undogmatic’. It is a feeling that does cast something of a blight over the general rejoicing of the average reader, and in it, I think, one finds an example (not perhaps a very successful one, from the point of view of the novel) of

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war is latent but actual—so actual indeed that a sword is literally drawn and a man is really killed. England herself appears in the novel in palpable form, for the story moves by symbols and not only all its characters but also 'an elm, a marriage, a symphony, and a scholar's library stand for things beyond themselves'.

This is true, and the novel's plot is too subtle for it to be possible to trace here the elaborate symbolisms to which Lionel Trilling refers, the successes and failures of legitimacy and illegitimacy. Perhaps more than any of Forster's novels this is one that would defy any kind of summary. Many of the difficult knots are again cut in scenes of melodrama and violence. Here, however, they are more successful than in the earlier novels, possibly because their connexion with the basic symbolism of the book is more accurate. Thus one can overlook the improbability of Helen's brief love affair with Leonard Bast, and the killing of Leonard by Charles Wilcox is really horrifying.

As for the book's conclusion, the final results of the effort 'to connect', one may not feel wholly satisfied; yet it is fair to say that the book's value is in the definition rather than in the solution of a problem. In the end the Wilcoxes are defeated. One is in prison, one turns in a kind of abjectness to his wife, Margaret Schlegel, who in the end has inherited the symbolic house. It may be said to be a hard-won victory for the inner life, yet, again to quote Lionel Trilling, 'It is not entirely a happy picture on which Forster concludes, this rather contrived scene of busyness and contentment in the hayfield; the male is too thoroughly gelded, and of the two women, Helen confesses that she cannot love a man, Margaret that she cannot love a child'.

There are two great symbols in this book which, in different forms, will re-occur after fourteen years in *A Passage to India*. One is that of the wise elderly woman, in this case the first Mrs. Wilcox. Her main points seem to be a kind of aristocratic indifference to the loves and fears of the ordinary world, and the mere facts of her femininity

war is latent but actual—so actual indeed that a sword is literally drawn and a man is really killed. England herself appears in the novel in palpable form, for the story moves by symbols and not only all its characters but also 'an elm, a marriage, a symphony, and a scholar's library stand for things beyond themselves'.

This is true, and the novel's plot is too subtle for it to be possible to trace here the elaborate symbolisms to which Lionel Trilling refers, the successes and failures of legitimacy and illegitimacy. Perhaps more than any of Forster's novels this is one that would defy any kind of summary. Many of the difficult knots are again cut in scenes of melodrama and violence. Here, however, they are more successful than in the earlier novels, possibly because their connexion with the basic symbolism of the book is more accurate. Thus one can overlook the improbability of Helen's brief love affair with Leonard Bast, and the killing of Leonard by Charles Wilcox is really horrifying.

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In 1912 Forster went to India for the first time. Here he was to find what seems to be the final symbol for his novels —something vaster than Italy, more inscrutable than an English house. After his return he began working on his novel, but soon abandoned it and did not begin again till after his second visit to India ten years later.

Possibly the delay was fortunate. The 1914 war took Forster to Alexandria where, in non-combatant jobs, he gained still wider experience of different races and of European officialdom. India was not forgotten, as is shown by a number of essays to be found in *Abinger Harvest*.

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At a tea party Professor Godbole sings a religious song. It is a prayer to the Lord of the Universe.

'He refuses to come. This is repeated several times,' announced the Professor. *5 28 23 6 27 96*

'But he comes in some other song, I hope?' said Mrs. Moore gently. *6 23 21 1052*

'Oh, no, he refuses to come,' repeated Godbole, perhaps not understanding her question. 'I say to Him, come, come, come, come, come, come. He neglects to come.'

It is a vision quite different from that of liberal Christianity. As the hot weather comes, as the young people quarrel and make it up again, she seems to move into a different, a more impersonal, an emptier world. We are told:

She felt increasingly (vision or nightmare?) that, though people are important the relations between them are not, and that in particular too much fuss has been made over marriage; centuries of carnal embracement, yet man is no nearer to understanding man.

The same idea occurs later, after her terrifying experience in the Marabar case. She says to her son, who is convinced that an attempt has been made to rape his fiancée:

'Why all this marriage, marriage? . . . The human race would have become a single person centuries ago if marriage was any use. And all this rubbish about love, love in a church, love in a cave, as if there is the least difference.'

These ideas seem so extraordinary as to deserve comment. It is difficult to believe that many lovers, married or not, can have regarded their 'carnal embracements' as being steps in the direction of the organization of the United Nations. Yet it is implied that this should have been the result. In some respects Mrs. Moore here may remind us

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On the other hand it may be said that Mrs. Moore is a link between Christianity and the atmosphere of barely understood Hinduism with which the book ends. She is a sacred memory both to the Moslem, Aziz, and to Godbole, the Hindu. Her children, one of whom marries Fielding, the only 'good' Englishman, are interested in Hinduism. True that Fielding is not wholly happy with this girl. She is, he says, 'after something', and we are told that 'he knew that his wife did not love him as much as he loved her'. Yet this state of affairs, combined with a common understanding of some aspects of Indian mysticism, seems to meet with the author's approval. 'In the language of theology', he says, 'their union had been blessed.' It does not appear to be any great beatification; and indeed, though much is condemned, nothing is really 'blessed' in this brilliant and perplexing book where vision and nightmare tread close upon each other's heels and often go hand in hand.

It is, I should suggest, in this combination of vision and nightmare much more than in a polite and scholarly rationalism and good will that are to be found the sources of Forster's genius. His literary criticism, in particular *Aspects of the Novel*, published in 1927, reveals a keen and individual mind; yet, for all its charm and interest, it does not seem to be criticism of the highest order. Common sense, great wit, and scholarship mark the essays, poems, and pieces that are collected together under the title *Abinger Harvest*. Here and there, perhaps, one may find something that appears to be over-whimsical, something that is not in a robust sense 'donnish'. Yet clarity, charm, fairness, and distinction are found on every page. These are qualities which mark his excellent biography of his friend Goldsworthy Lowes Dickinson (1934).

Yet it is undoubtedly by his novels that he will be chiefly remembered. Thus I have felt justified in devoting nearly all my space to them. It will be seen that their message, if they can be said to have a message, is not easy and is not entirely liberal. Good sense and good will may seem to be

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